

Check Against Delivery

International Expert Group Meeting

on

**Indigenous Youth:
Identity, Challenges and Hope:
Articles 14, 17, 21 and 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the
Rights of Indigenous Peoples
29 - 31 January 2013, New York**

Opening Statement by Grand Chief Edward John

Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Distinguished Ms. Shamshad Akhtar, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Affairs,

Distinguished co-Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,

Distinguished experts,

Distinguished participants from the UN system, Member States, indigenous peoples and other organizations,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to be here today at the opening of the Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Youth. Thank you to the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues who organized this meeting on the theme: “Indigenous Youth”: Identity, Challenges and Hope: articles 14, 17, 21 and 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”.

It is a pleasure to see so many young people here and that all the experts for this meeting are indigenous youth from different regions of the world.

Like our elders the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, believes that "We must help young people to build the future they want. This should be in our hearts and on top of every agenda. The priorities

of young people should be just as prominent in our halls as they are on the streets and squares”.

Your work, your ideas and views over these next few days will contribute to and help shape a way for other young people around the world. Yours is an important responsibility. Every generation, in their time, meets this challenge.

Our elders remind us constantly: "be proud of who you are and where you come from". It sounds pretty trite. But let me put it this way. ""Who are you?" and "where do you come from"?

Just what determines who you are? For me one of the most important is our original language...one of many Indigenous languages in virtually every corner of the world. In my language for example we explain our family relationships in kinship terms...not by proper names. It is explained to us that in our history there was such tremendous respect that no one was called by their name, only by their kinship relation. So now in order to regain back the language we are losing we are introducing these terms...to teach language, family relations and a sense of self and identity.

And where we come from? In every corner of our lands and territories we have our place names. Yet somehow we use the non Indigenous languages to identify and know these places. Why? So now we begin to use technology

available to us, map these areas and cover it with names in our languages. As we bring the children and youth onto the land we connect them back to their places, their histories, their peoples in their own language.

I want to read Article 25 of the UN Declaration, which in my opinion represents the "spirit" of the Declaration:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard"

As a child and a young person growing up in my village in northern Canada we were taught our peoples stories, legends, histories, philosophies and the many teachings about our lands. These had one common thread...that the first order of relationships to family, community, land, all animals was grounded in "responsibility" based on respect.

It was into this world that we saw in Canada the dramatic intrusion of government policies of assimilation, infamously described as one which would "kill the Indian in the child". I was sent to one of those schools because then these were the only schools open to Indian children. Through us our peoples were supposed to no longer exist as Indigenous peoples with

distinctive cultures, languages and ways of life. We were to be the instruments of our own destruction. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada recently described this period in our history as one of "cultural genocide".

Being young, surely can be a time of difficulty, but it is also a time of creativity, innovation, energy and certainly a spirit of idealism.

Youth account for approximately 18 per cent of the global population and with some 370 million indigenous peoples in the world, there are approximately 67 million indigenous youth globally.

Our youth face diverse challenges, often different to those faced by non-indigenous youth. One of them is education. Illiteracy, which tends to be higher among indigenous youth than non-indigenous youth is a direct result of educational exclusion in the form of poor access, low funding, culturally and linguistically inadequate education. As a result in many countries, indigenous youth have low school enrolment, low completion rates and lag behind other groups in terms of academic achievement.

As well Indigenous youth tend to experience higher unemployment rates and lower incomes compared to non-indigenous youth workers. A range of factors contribute to this differential status, including geographic disadvantages, lower education and training levels, discrimination, and labour market discouragement.

This situation contributes to the pressure that many indigenous youth feel to leave their communities in search of employment and education opportunities. It does not have to be just this way. Many indigenous youth stay and live in their communities, to maintain their relationships and to contribute to the maintenance, strengthening and revitalization of their communities.

At its first session the Forum stated that it "...intended to make indigenous children and youth a focal point of its work in the years to come¹." This was followed through in 2003 when the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was dedicated to "indigenous children and youth". During the course of its first eleven sessions, the Permanent Forum has developed

¹ E/2002/43/Rev.1 para. 31.

over thirty recommendations addressing indigenous youth issues to UN Agencies, Member States and indigenous people's organizations.

Almost half of these recommendations address indigenous youth participation in decision-making, emphasizing the principle that indigenous youth should be engaged in activities and decision-making processes that affect their well-being. Related to the theme of participation, the Forum has also made recommendations on the need to increase investment in capacity building for indigenous youth.

The Permanent Forum has recognized and appreciates the passion, commitment and work of the "indigenous youth caucus" and welcomes their participation at the annual sessions. The youth caucus plays a key role in bringing indigenous youth, introducing them to the work of the United Nations and that of the Permanent Forum. As advocates and leaders on the international stage it is important that you know about these spaces at the global level to better link to your work within your communities.

As we were told recently by young leaders in Guatemala, you all will one day be in these positions we hold...to advocate for the rightful place of Indigenous peoples among the many civilizations of this world.

Last week UNICEF published, in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the indigenous youth caucus, an "adolescent-friendly" guide on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This document represents an important development for indigenous and non-indigenous adolescents to better know the human rights of Indigenous Peoples and how to advocate for their implementation. We congratulate Cindy Blackstock, the author of the publication and, UNICEF for this initiative.

I look forward to hear from you and thank you for taking the time to be here . I am sure that your experience and insights will enrich the discussion and will help the Forum to better approach indigenous youth concerns. The report of this Expert Group Meeting will be presented to the twelfth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues taking place this May here in New York.

Thank you very much,